

Subject, Object and Idea

Our course on Hegel is in ten parts. It is not exhaustive. It is designed, like all the Communist University Courses, to stimulate dialogue, in the belief that the kind of learning that we seek is the social and political kind of learning that happens in groups.

This part will contain only one item, which is the eighth of Andy Blunden's ten 2007 lectures on Hegel's Logic. It contains several quotations from Hegel, and there will be more in this post, below. We are not abandoning the main CU principle of relying on original writing and (as a rule) avoiding secondary commentators.

Hegel is indispensable because, among other things:

- Without knowledge about the historical Hegel, Hegelianism, and some of Hegel's philosophy, it could appear as if Marx and Engels came from nowhere, whereas

the development, and history, of ideas (as Hegel showed) is continuous, and dialectical

- Without knowledge of Hegel's way of thinking, and in particular his *Logic*, some of Marx, especially parts of *Capital*, appears obscure, incomprehensible or even weak and "illogical"
- Modern philosophy all descends from Hegel or from reactions to Hegel. Not only Marx, but all of Hegel's successors are incomprehensible without Hegel
- The revolutionary battle must be won in philosophy as much as anywhere else, if not more so
- Hegel's is the philosophy that we need for our revolutionary practice.

Hegel is difficult for us because:

- His work appears at first sight to be voluminous, self-contradictory and obscure
- The body of scholars that maintain Hegel's position in public thought is too small, and conflicted
- Hegel offers real transformation, which is in itself a difficult thing to accept and to internalise

The last line of Andy Blunden's lecture **Subject, Object and Idea** (download linked below) contains the following:

"No-one else has produced anything that can rival [Hegel's] Logic; and he left no room for imitators."

And in the first line of his second-last section of this lecture, **“Hegel’s critique of the individual/society dichotomy”** Andy Blunden writes:

“So what we have seen is that Hegel presented a critique of all aspects of social life by an exposition of the logic of formations of consciousness, which does not take the individual person as its unit of analysis but rather a concept. A concept is understood, not as some extramundane entity but a practical relation among people mediated by ‘thought objects’, i.e., artefacts.”

Quite so. Hegel presented a **critique of social life**. All of Hegel’s “Beings”, “Essences”, “Notions” *et cetera*, all the way up to and including “The Idea” and “The Spirit”, are ways of understanding people as social creatures (or “political animals” as Aristotle called them).

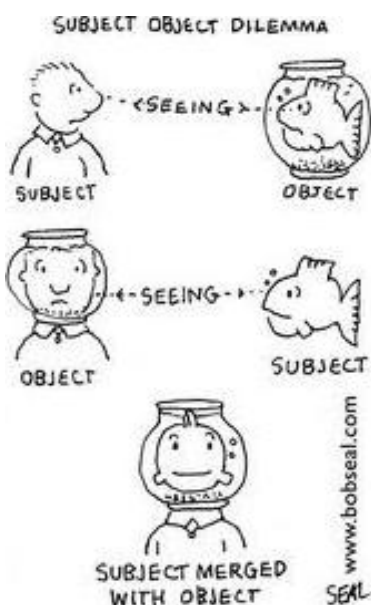
This is from the “Shorter Logic”:

“The Idea is truth in itself and for itself - the absolute unity of the notion and objectivity. Its ‘ideal’ content is nothing but the notion in its detailed terms: its ‘real’ content is only the exhibition which the notion gives itself in the form of external existence, while yet, by enclosing this shape in its ideality, it keeps it in its power, and so keeps itself in it. The Idea is the Truth: for Truth is the correspondence of objectivity with the notion - not of course the correspondence of external things with my conceptions, for these are only correct conceptions held by me, the individual person. In the idea we have nothing to do with the individual, nor with figurate conceptions, nor with

external things. And yet, again, everything actual, in so far as it is true, is the Idea, and has its truth by and in virtue of the Idea alone. Every individual being is some one aspect of the Idea: for which, therefore, yet other actualities are needed, which in their turn appear to have a self-subsistence of their own. It is only in them altogether and in their relation that the notion is realised.

“The individual by itself does not correspond to its notion. It is this limitation of its existence which constitutes the finitude and the ruin of the individual.” (Shorter Logic, §213)

Not only does Hegel produce a thorough working-out of the relation of the individual to society, but he also unifies the Subject-Object dichotomy with the rest of the social logic. Without Hegel such unification would be impossible, and we would be left with nothing but nonsense like this cartoon:



To conclude this opening-to-discussion, let us return to something we have quoted before. It is from an afterword of

Karl Marx's, concerning the very work "Capital" that Lenin says cannot be understood without Hegel's "Logic":

"My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of "the Idea," he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea." With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.

*"The mystifying side of Hegelian dialectic I criticised nearly thirty years ago [but although] **I openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker...** with him [dialectic] is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."*

The great Marx was arguing against Right Hegelians and anti-Hegelians at that stage, and in defence of Hegel. Unfortunately this saying of Marx is sometimes taken to mean that Marx had somehow "refuted" Hegel, demolished him and sent him into the dustbin of history, whereas the opposite is the case. Marx "*openly avowed [himself] the pupil of that mighty thinker*", and he certainly followed Hegel in believing that such "refutations" do not happen. In the Marxian as much as in the Hegelian world, the past is contained in the present, and is not lost.

Marx's remark could lead to another error. It is clear that Marx

is not saying here that he, Marx, stood Hegel on his head. He says that Hegel stood dialectic on its head. In fact, as we have seen, Hegel's method involves constant reversals and Marx follows Hegel in that respect. So Marx might have better confined himself to saying that Hegel stood dialectic on its head *once too often*. We cannot say that all the reversals must be taken out of Hegel because it is largely in this way of reversals that Hegel is able to achieve the unprecedented transformations that he does undoubtedly achieve; and likewise with Marx himself. What we can say is that sometimes Hegel makes mistakes and offers a reversal that we may reject. But even then we should not be too hasty. Andy Blunden says:

"We should take [Hegel] at his word when he says that Spirit is the nature of human beings en masse. All human communities construct their social environment, both in the sense of physically constructing the artefacts which they use in the collaborating together, and in the sense that, in the social world at least, things are what they are only because they are so construed. The idea of spirit needs to be taken seriously. It may seem odd to say, as Hegel does, that everything is thought, but it is no more viable to say that everything is matter, and if you want to use a dichotomy of thought and matter instead, things get even worse."

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Subject, Object and Idea, 2007, Blunden](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).